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ABSTRACT

As part of the Basic Citizenship Competencies Project, this guide is intended for parents and suggests ways to assess what they can do to help their children practice and develop competent civic behavior. The objective of the entire project is to assist educators, parents, and community leaders in identifying basics, clarifying goals, making assessments, and developing action plans related to citizenship education. The guide is designed to help parents consider the problem of promoting good citizenship in a systematic manner, using a common vocabulary and a common set of guiding principles. The guide defines citizenship as comprised of "the rights, responsibilities, and tasks associated with governing the various groups to which a person belongs." It also states that "citizenship education must involve learning and instruction directed to the development of citizen competence." Seven basic competencies are listed and discussed: acquiring and using information about political situations; assessing one's own involvement and stake in political situations; making thoughtful decisions regarding group governance and problems of citizenship; developing and using standards to make judgments; communicating ideas; cooperating and working with others to achieve mutual goals; and working with bureaucratic institutions in order to promote and protect one's interests and values. The document recommends that parents provide learning experiences at home offering practice in citizenship behavior. Two checklists are appended suggesting ways parents can promote citizenship education at home and helping them assess the quality of citizenship education in the school. (CK)

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DEVELOPING YOUR CHILD'S CITIZENSHIP COMPETENCE

A Parent's Guide

by

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SO 011 969

A project of the
Citizenship Development Program
Mershon Center, Ohio State University

and the

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This is one of several source documents developed by the Basic Citizenship Competencies Project. This is a joint project of the Mershon Center, The Ohio State University, and the Social Science Education Consortium, Boulder, Colorado. The goal of this project has been to prepare materials that will assist educators, parents and community leaders as they seek to identify basics, clarify goals, make assessments and develop action plans related to citizenship education.

Products developed by the Project are:

Handbook of Basic Citizenship Competencies

Guide to Basic Citizenship Competencies: Recommendations to Compare Curriculum Materials, Assess Classroom Instruction, and set Goals

Principals and Citizenship Education: A Guide for Effective Leadership

The Community and Citizenship: A Guide for Planning and Leadership

Developing your Child's Citizenship Competence: A Parent's Guide

Executive Summary

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DEVELOPING YOUR CHILD'S CITIZENSHIP COMPETENCE

Educating competent citizens is one of the most important tasks faced by society. In the United States, a great deal of time and energy has been devoted to this task by parents, teachers, school administrators, and community leaders. Yet the results of a recent national educational assessment indicate that students at all levels are deficient in both the knowledge and skills related to citizenship participation. How can we improve their citizenship education?

Part of the problem is related to the increasing complexity of the environment in which citizens must operate. More knowledge and skills are required of today's citizen then were necessary 50 or even 25 years ago. Educators have tried to respond to this need by providing new programs based on new content areas. On the whole, students of today know more about the legal system, social problems, global interdependence, energy, the environment, and consumer issues than students knew a decade ago. But knowledge alone is not enough--until students have mastered the skills required to responsibly participate in public and private decision making, they will not be able to effectively use such knowledge.

Another aspect of the problem has to do with the many ways in which citizenship education takes place. Political learning and education relevant to citizenship are not confined to the schools. The home, religious organizations, the business and labor communities, voluntary organizations, and the media--all are sources that affect the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and experiences that are important in developing competent citizens.

Thus, improved citizenship education means more than changing textbooks or implementing new courses in the schools. Parents and community leaders need to assess what they can do to promote competent civic behavior. Although this task is complex and requires the participation of all sectors of the community, it is not beyond our collective skills. The trick is to consider the whole problem systematically, using a common vocabulary and a common set of guiding principles. This guide is designed to serve that purpose.

First we will define the term *citizenship*. Then we will discuss what *citizenship education* means and provide seven basic competencies which all effective citizens should have. Finally, we will present two checklists--one that indicates what parents can do to promote citizenship education at home and another that will help parents assess the quality of citizenship education in their children's schools.

What Is Citizenship?

Briefly stated, *citizenship comprises the rights, responsibilities, and tasks associated with governing the various groups to which a person belongs*. These groups may include families, churches, labor unions, schools, and private associations as well as cities, states, the nation, and the global system. As members of these groups, youngsters as well as adults are involved--directly and indirectly, knowingly or unknowingly--in citizenship problems and in tasks associated with governance.

There are several key ideas in this definition. First, because it focuses on governance, it clearly specifies what is and what is not citizenship education. Health education, driver education, and typing are not citizenship education because the content of these courses does not deal with issues of governance. On the other hand, because citizenship education should properly be concerned with developing competent behavior, there is no reason why citizenship competencies cannot be introduced in and taught in these programs.

Second, the definition suggests that governance is a phenomenon that occurs in the family, in the church, in unions, in schools, in small business, and in large corporations as well as in government. All of these groups set goals; decide how such resources as wealth, safety, and power are created and shared among the membership; and make and enforce rules. Citizens in all of these groups make decisions and deal with such basic political phenomena as choice, conflict, authority, change, and interdependence.

The third significant idea in the definition is related to the fact that young people as well as adults engage in the citizenship tasks of the groups to which they belong. The following example may illustrate this point:

> A family consisting of a father, mother, and three children might decide (make decisions) to go to Yellowstone Park on their next vacation. The three children, aged 15, 12, and 7, want to earn some spending money for the trip (set goals).

> The parents agree that this is a good idea, and they talk to the children about appropriate ways they might do this. It is determined that the jobs must be in the neighborhood and that no job can last longer than two hours a day (set rules). The oldest youngster must accompany the youngest (interdependence).
>
> Each of the children asks if he or she can bring a friend along on the trip. Permission is granted to the 15-year-old but refused to the other two (allocate valued things). The two younger children are upset about the decision (conflict) and angry at their parents (authority). The parents assure them that their friends can go along when they are older (change).

All of the phenomena and processes that characterize political life are present in this little vignette. Similar examples could be drawn from everyday experiences in business, church, a voluntary association, or a school.

What Is Citizenship Education?

If citizenship is concerned with the tasks of governing groups, *citizenship education must involve learning and instruction directed to the development of citizen competence*. In effect, citizen education must provide learning experiences and opportunities designed to help students develop those basic competencies and capacities which will allow them to participate effectively in processes related to group governance.

What Are Basic Citizenship Competencies?

For years many curriculum developers have used the "laundry list" approach to citizenship education. That is, they have designed programs around a random selection of content or skills which they believed citizens should know about. We believe that it makes more sense to develop programs that specifically emphasize those basic competencies that all citizens should possess if they are going to be able to act responsibly and preserve and protect their rights and interests.

The competencies are limited to seven. They are close to being universally relevant because they are linked to tasks that everyone--regardless of sex, age, ethnic background, social class, or other descriptor--faces in some form in the course of daily living. All seven competencies are generally applicable to any area--family, school, church, city, nation--in which an

individual functions as a citizen. Furthermore, they can be taught continually at many age levels and at increasing levels of sophistication.

We believe that all citizens should be competent in:

1. Acquiring and using information about political situations. It may seem that acquiring information is such an obvious requirement of citizens in a complex society that it is hardly worth mentioning. More precisely, however, the task involves knowing what information is appropriate and where it can be located. For example, the children in our earlier illustration might need to find out something about age restrictions on employment.

Once information is acquired, citizens must decide what to do with it. Which pieces from among the many that are available are most useful? Do some sources seem better than others? How do the pieces fit together? What conclusions can be drawn? For example, our hypothetical children would need to know that information about working conditions in England would not be relevant. They might hesitate to believe the advice of their friends but they probably could rely on a brochure picked up at a state employment office. On the other hand, if the brochure made general statements about all workers, they would have to select and apply only those portions dealing with children.

2. Assessing their involvement and stake in political situations, issues, decisions, and policies. Competence in this area is critical if citizens are going to be able to protect and promote their own interests. No citizen has the time or energy to become involved in all political situations, so citizens must decide which issues are most important to them or to their group or nation. In addition to considering the short-term political implications of going on a vacation, our hypothetical family might need to decide whether the rising incidence of vandalism in their neighborhood might make it likely that their home could be damaged in their absence or whether instability in the Middle East and the probability of a gasoline shortage might mean the trip would become too expensive. A decision to construct a new superhighway by-passing the father's store might have an adverse impact on the family income, as would a decision to raise property taxes.

Competence in this area also implies that citizens can identify ways in which they can act in these situations. The mother might help organize a neighborhood crime watch; the father could contact others who would be affected by the superhighway and start developing some alternatives. They might protest rising property taxes at a city council meeting or write to their representative to Congress about Middle Eastern policy.

3. Making thoughtful decisions regarding group governance and problems of citizenship. Decision making is an inescapable part of citizenship for young and old alike. People must decide when it is important to act, what is the best action to take, what will be the probable consequences of their action or nonaction, and what goals or values they are promoting. If, for example, our family ignored the fact that more and more crime was being committed in their neighborhood and decided to take no action, their property might be stolen, a neighbor might be injured, property values might decline. The family would have unwittingly chosen an alternative which contradicted its own values and interests.

4. Developing and using standards such as justice, ethics, morality, and practicality to make judgments of people, institutions, policies, and decisions. Competence in making evaluative judgments in some ways undergirds all of the other competencies. It is necessary to be able to judge the quality of information, the meaning of a particular policy, and the possible effects of a decision. Unfortunately, all too often judgments are made without a set of thoughtfully considered standards. Candidates for political office might be judged on the basis of appearance; applicants for membership in a club might be selected on the basis of skin color or because they drive expensive cars. Our hypothetical family might decide to continue planning for their vacation despite rising gasoline prices or lowered income simply because they have always taken a vacation in the summer.

The point is that sound and appropriate criteria or standards should be used in evaluating political situations. These criteria should be applied systematically and reassessed in terms of changing conditions or new situations.

5. Communicating ideas to other citizens, decision makers, leaders, and officials. Citizens certainly need to communicate. They need to be able to present their views about political issues to their friends and neighbors in informal settings. They need to be able to present their views to public officials in public arenas.

Presenting one's ideas and views implies the ability to construct a sensible argument. In requesting that their friends be allowed to accompany the family on vacation, the two younger children would have benefited if they had presented some reasons why taking friends would be advantageous. Similarly, the mother would have to be able to convince the neighbors by means of reasonable arguments that a neighborhood crime watch would benefit all. The father might need to write to the state highway commission or appear before the chamber of commerce to get the support he needed to reroute the superhighway.

6. Cooperating and working with others in groups and organizations to achieve mutual goals. Citizenship has to do with groups. It involves the governance of such groups as families, schools, places of business, and voluntary organizations. In addition, participation in the governance of larger groups often occurs through the actions of special-interest groups, task forces, and committees. Working effectively in a group requires the abilities to present ideas; work as either a leader or follower; manage and cope with group conflict; interact with others of different sex, age, race, culture, and ethnic background; and act according to democratic values.

The development of these skills, like all of the others, starts in the family. Children who are never allowed to present their ideas at home or who are ridiculed when they express themselves are not likely to become competent in working in adult groups. If only one means for coping with group conflict ("Shut up and sit down") is used, skills at arbitrating and compromising are never acquired or tested. If a parent refuses to interact with other business people because they are "different," children are likely to grow up reflecting that kind of undemocratic behavior.

7. Working with bureaucratically organized institutions in order to promote and protect one's interests and values. Large organizations and bureaucracies are an inescapable part of modern life. Hence it behooves citizens to understand the structures of such institutions, the extent to

which they influence daily life, and the ways in which they can be influenced. It is often a unit of government, for example, that provides our utilities, inspects the food we eat, trains the handicapped, builds roads, safeguards our property, and provides welfare payments. In addition to these human services, the government also provides protection for human rights through the judicial system, protects the environment, and assists consumers.

Citizens who need the services that government offers are often unaware of or unskilled at mobilizing the available resources. Our hypothetical family might want to contact the state employment office to identify employment options for the children, alert the police and the district attorney's office to the crime problem and perhaps develop a cooperative strategy for dealing with it, and determine whether or not an environmental impact statement had been developed for the proposed highway.

Parents have a major role and responsibility in making sure that their children develop the competencies we have listed. To begin with, they can provide significant learning experiences in the home which will give children the opportunity to practice competent citizenship behavior. Doing this requires awareness of the educational potential in everyday situations and some ingenuity in finding activities which can enhance the competencies of children. Second, parents can inquire into and make judgments about the quality of citizenship education being offered in their children's schools.

Children are involved in political encounters every day at home; the challenge is for parents to use these encounters as learning experiences in which children can practice competent behavior. Schools are already educating children; the task for teachers is to refocus the curriculum so that classroom experiences are provided in which citizenship competencies can be learned.

The two checklists that follow can help parents (1) consider what experiences they are now providing and think about additional learning experiences they might be able to provide for their children and (2) assess the learning opportunities which are available in the schools.

Checklist 1

IMPROVING THE HOME AS AN ENVIRONMENT FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Guiding Questions	Learning Opportunities Provided		
	Many	Some	None
Competency 1: Acquiring and Using Information			
1 Do I help my children find information from many sources?			
2 Do I help them choose information that is useful in solving problems?			
3 Do I encourage them to organize information in a way that helps them to achieve their goals?			
Competency 2: Assessing Involvement			
4 Do I help my children identify why a situation may be important to them?			
5 Do I help them to see how their actions may affect others?			
6 Do I help them to see how their failure to act may affect themselves and others?			
Competence 3: Making Decisions			
7 Do I help my children consider many alternatives when they make decisions?			
8 Do I ask them to consider the results of different decisions?			
9 Do I encourage them to participate in family decisions?			

Guiding Questions	Learning Opportunities Provided		
	Many	Some	None
Competency 4: Making Judgments			
10 Do I help my children develop standards for making political judgments?			
11 Do I encourage them to use their guidelines consistently?			
12 Do I respect and listen to their judgments?			
Competency 5: Communicating			
13 Do I help my children prepare good arguments supporting their point s of view?			
14 Do I listen to their arguments and consider them when making family decisions?			
15 Do I encourage them to write to public officials or share their opinions orally at school?			
Competency 6: Cooperating With Others			
16 Do I work with my children in achieving family goals?			
17 Do I encourage them to participate in many groups, both as leaders and as followers?			
18 Do I encourage them to work cooperatively with people of both sexes and many different races, cultures, and ages?			

Guiding Questions	Learning Opportunities Provided		
	Many	Some	None
Competency 7: Promoting Interests			
19 Do I help them to learn about large institutions?			
20 Do I help them identify ways of protecting their rights and interests?			

Checklist 2

ASSESSING THE QUALITY OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN THE SCHOOLS

	Guiding Questions	YES	NO
1	Does the school district provide competency-building learning experiences that span grade levels and cut across departments?		
2	Do the learning experiences seem to be part of a thoughtfully designed pattern, with new learning experiences evidencing increasing levels of challenge?		
3	Do the learning experiences seem to be personally useful to students?		
4	Are the learning experiences action oriented, in the sense that they require students to practice competent behavior in real or simulated settings?		
5	Are students recognized as citizens of the school and allowed to participate in such activities as school rule making, goal setting, and decision making?		